

Schools of Alienation

The Hobbesian culture of American education

By Nick Gillespie

The victims of the Columbine High School shootings in Littleton, Colorado, have been buried, if not fully laid to rest. Even as the incident fades from sharp memory and the schools empty for summer vacation, there's a good reason why this terrifying incident should haunt our national consciousness longer than similar tragedies in Springfield, Oregon; Jonesboro, Arkansas; West Paducah, Kentucky; and Pearl, Mississippi. It's not simply because the death toll is so much higher than in past massacres, or the mayhem so much more calculated.

However horrific, the actions of other schoolyard gunmen such as Kip Kinkel or Luke Woodham can be readily understood as stemming from individual pathologies and, hence, not particularly reflective of broader social issues. In contrast, the Columbine shootings can be seen as implicating not only the killers' own sick, twisted minds, but a school culture which humiliated and tormented them in ways that are all too familiar to most Americans.

The result has been a highly uncomfortable—but strangely understandable—empathy for Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris. When *Newsweek* quotes a classmate saying that the two walked the halls of Columbine “with their heads down, because if they looked up they'd get thrown into lockers and get called a ‘fag,’” who doesn't exactly understand the anger and frustration such abuse inspires? When *Time* reports that they were routinely physically threatened and taunted as “dirt bags” and “inbreds,” who doesn't feel a twinge of outrage on their behalf? In a strange way—and one starkly at odds with the early media narrative of Klebold and Harris as isolated, inhu-

man killing machines—the pair almost emerged from the coverage as high school everymen, stand-ins for every bad memory of adolescent injury in a school setting.

After writing a column on the shooting for the World Wide Web site Slashdot.org, journalist Jon Katz was surprised to receive a deluge of “jarring testimonials from kids, adults, men and women” that while in no way exonerating the killers, “explained more—a lot more—about Littleton than all the vapid media stories about video violence, Goths, [and] game-crazed geeks.” As one respondent put it, “I'm a geek under the skin...was a state champ in the high jump, and the leading scorer on the track team, so I was not quite the outcast that some...geeks are, but I understand what they are going through.” Or, as another wrote, “I was much like those kids when I was in school—weird, cast out, not much liked, alienated, all that sort of thing...I used to imagine bringing weaponry to school and making the fuckers who made my life miserable beg for mercy.”

Such responses are hardly limited to the

sorts of technophilic “geeks” likely to surf the Web. Virtually everyone I spoke with after the shootings—people ranging from college professors to package-delivery men, from lawyers to current high school students, from ex-jocks to ex-band members—expressed some understanding of and appreciation for what they took to be the killers' mind-set. These ranged from the comments of a gay friend who half-jokingly wished he'd had access to guns while in high school to the confession of an athletic standout who felt sick at the bullying company he kept during the same years.

Needless to say, nothing shifts the final responsibility for violence away from its perpetrators. But such unexpected fellow-feeling should give us great pause, even as it also helps to explain the recurring motif of school-related alienation and discomfort in popular works as varied in age, tone, setting, and genre as *The Catcher in the Rye*, *Rebel Without a Cause*, *Blackboard Jungle*, *The Outsiders*, *The Basketball Diaries*, *Carrie*, Pink Floyd's *The Wall*, *Heathers*, MTV's *Daria*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, and *She's All That*. These and similar works are not all violent, but all in some way address the stultifying effects of a school culture that is widely acknowledged as nasty and brutish, conformist and repressive—and, all too often, brazenly anti-intellectual. It is almost as if we cannot even imagine schools that are not just a few steps removed from *Lord of the Flies*.

Of course, adolescence is at best a difficult, awkward period. It's a time when children move toward adulthood in tentative, often faltering steps—a process of individuation and identity creation that necessarily implies discomfort, discontent, and bouts of real and imagined alienation and ostracism. The question is whether schools tend to exacerbate those feelings or to sublimate them to some higher end. Do they reduce the pain of



adolescence or add to it? The general understanding of Klebold's and Harris' experiences strongly suggests the former.

In a strange coincidence, a previously planned special issue of *Rolling Stone* on "the new teen spirit" hit the newsstands shortly after the Columbine shootings. Part of the magazine, tellingly titled "When Everything Sucked," was devoted to reminiscences by musicians and actors about their teen years. One major theme was how harrowing high school was, psychologically as well as physically. "It was brutal—like a prison," said rock star Rob Zombie, in a typical comment. To be sure, the dreadlocked Zombie—like the other

participants in the article—is hardly a representative sample. But he is onto something nonetheless: American high schools often do resemble prisons, and not simply because they tend to be large, impersonal institutions filled with gangs, drugs, and cops or because they tend to prize order above all else. They are filled with many people who would rather be elsewhere.

It is, of course, wrong to hope for anything decent to come out of a tragedy like the one at Columbine High. But perhaps some small scrap of good can be salvaged if it forces us to envision—and to create—schools that do not become personal hells for so many kids. ♦

Empty Lessons

Going to lunch on the ruins

By Jesse Walker

With a tone that was simultaneously hysterical and pompous, the pundits started searching for "the lessons of Littleton." Hundreds of commentaries later, only one lesson seems clear: No event is so unique or horrific that it cannot instantly be reduced to an editorialist's cliché.

The very day of the massacre—long before we even had an accurate count of the dead—Peter Jennings was treating viewers to a clip from *The Basketball Diaries*, a fantasy sequence in which a trench coat-clad Leonardo DiCaprio carries a gun to school and blows his classmates away. Littleton, Jennings announced, was sure to "reopen the debate" (had it been closed?) on the effects of media violence. He did not, however, stop showing footage of the terror, surely as intense a blast of media violence as anything in any movie.

So it began. Editorialists, activists, preachers, politicians: Everyone with a platform became an instant expert on the inner lives of Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, the boys who killed 12 students, one teacher, and themselves at Columbine High School. Within a day of the assault, Colorado Gov. Bill Owens was declaring that the murderers didn't "have the same moral background as the rest of us." Bill Davenport, a Baptist pastor in San Cle-

mente, confidently asserted that the killers didn't value life "because they haven't been taught about God." On CNN, criminologist Mike Rustigan declared, "Obviously, here, we are seeing non-parenting parents."

And where did these people acquire this insight into the shooters' moral upbringing? From thin air.

If you didn't like some part of pop culture, Littleton was a gold mine: Anything and everything could be attacked. Want to blame movies? MGM recalled all videos of *The Basketball Diaries*, letting the commentators turn their tut-tuts against *Heathers* and *The Matrix*. Want to blame video games? No report from Colorado was complete without the obligatory allusion to Doom. Want to blame music? Critics attacked Rammstein, KMFDM, and Marilyn Manson; the last bowed to political pressure and canceled the rest of his concert tour. (One wonders how many of the Marilyn-bashing moralists used to giggle to the folk ditty that begins, "Mine eyes have seen the glory of the burning of the school/We have murdered every teacher, we have broken every rule...")

The president himself weighed in, taking a break from his own massacre in the Balkans to declare that he would meet with "some high-level folks from the entertain-

ment industry" to ask them to tone down their products. *The Wall Street Journal* blamed the massacre on a "culture of chaos" in which one might see "surviving Columbine students willing to go on national TV to talk about the massacre of 15 among them, but by golly they're not going to take off those backward baseball caps to do it." Jerry Falwell suggested that the killers were gay, a cry taken up in a press release from Topeka's Westboro Baptist Church: "Two filthy fags slaughtered 13 people at Columbine High."

In the course of their crimes, Harris and Klebold broke more than a dozen gun laws already on the books. There were, nonetheless, calls for still more gun control, as though there were some magic number of regulations that would suddenly make a potential schoolhouse killer junk his plans. "By the time our children leave school at the start of the summer," announced Handgun Control, Inc. Chair Sarah Brady, "they should know that the lawmakers of this country have done something to protect them from the type of gun violence that occurred at Littleton." Further demands for gun laws issued from figures ranging from Rosie O'Donnell to...Marilyn Manson.

And, as always, there were attacks on the Internet. If anything was suspicious about shooter Eric Harris, surely it was that he had a *Web page*. (He kept a diary, too, but for some reason there have been no frantic denunciations of notebooks.) The BBC straightforwardly described a "probe" into "whether the killers learned how to make bombs from the Internet." On MSNBC, criminologist Casey Jordan declared that the Net was "the key" to the story: "They were in chat rooms; they had Web pages. And on the Internet, the possibility for recruiting is just unknown."

Drugs, too, took a drubbing. Reps. John Peterson (R-Pa.) and James Rogan (R-Calif.) announced that they would propose legislation allowing schools to give students random drug tests, declaring that this would make future massacres less likely. When told that no traces of any drugs had been found in the shooters' bodies, Peterson was unswayed, arguing that narcotics had been a factor in "other" incidents. The Family Research Council sent out a fax claiming that April 20, the